

January 29, 2012
Ellicott City Parish of The United Methodist Church
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Sermon: Magic? Mystery? Miracle?: *Movement in the Practice of Prayer*, Week 1
Lesson: *The Message* John 17:20-21

*I'm praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.*

A reporter once asked Roman Catholic missionary Mother Teresa what she prayed about. Her answer was that she simply was listening to what God had to say to her. The reporter was intrigued. “What does God say to you?” he asked Mother Teresa. She smiled and replied, “Oh, when I’m listening to God, He is just listening to me!”



Like me, I’m sure the reporter was confused by Mother Teresa’s answer. But I think Mother Teresa was on to something, and that something is that prayer is about listening. When we pray, God is listening to us, and we need to be ready because I think God wants us to listen back to what God has to say to us.

Today is the first Sunday of a 4-week Sunday series that the Ellicott City Parish of The United Methodist Church is doing on prayer. On our Thursday night young adult worship services, Pastor Cathy invited us two weeks ago into a time of prayer at different prayer stations set up around our Emory campus’ sanctuary. And this past Thursday, Pastor Carrie led us in a labyrinth walk and reminded us to Look Up to the kingdom of Heaven, Read Up on prayer, and Pray Up to God. Pastors Cathy, David, and I have been reading a lot about prayer recently.

And most of the books I’ve been looking at say that prayer is about being in a close relationship with God. And this brings me back to this idea of listening. I learned long ago that relationships develop well when participants in that relationship are willing to listen to one another. We learn in a classroom by listening to the teacher and by listening to the ideas of other students. We play a sport well by listening to the coach. We make friends by listening to what their interests are and sensing if they are compatible with our own. A couple may enter into a longer term relationship if they hear

that their life goals are similar and can be challenged in a healthy way by one another. And, in order to solve disagreements, rivals must listen to one another.

And God wants to listen to us, too. This listening to us – our desires, our fears, our hopes, our uncertainties – is about God’s desire to be in an intimate relationship with us.

But prayer is about more than listening. And I think it is appropriate for our first week about prayer to unpack what prayer is, how it has and can be used, and why prayer is important to us. And I will also provide some tips for how you can pray with purpose.

First, for us, in addition to listening and discerning what God wants for us, prayer is about speaking to God. This speaking can be done aloud or silently, but it is always done intentionally. This intentional aspect of prayer is important because prayer is more than simply going through the day or the week hoping that God will help you by making things go well. There are several different kinds of prayer. In preparing for this sermon, I was able to identify five kinds. You may know of others. But in no particular order, my five kinds of prayer or reasons for praying are these:



First, ***prayer is about expressing thankfulness or gratefulness to God for something.*** We all have different reasons for thanking God. For some, we might thank God for our health or our home. We may be grateful to God for family or other loved ones. Every Sunday, we thank God for the opportunity we have to make an offering of our gifts for the work of the church in the world.

Second, ***prayer can be about expressing anger toward God.*** This might seem a strange thing to think about, particularly after I’ve just said that prayer can be about expressing thanks. But prayer is not always the same, nor does it need to be. When Jesus cried out to God on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he was quoting Psalm 22. I believe in the midst of his pain, Jesus may have experienced that human emotion of anger, despair, or simply wondering if God had left him. Some people are fearful of being angry with God, worried that God might be angry back. I don’t think this is case, though. God is powerful enough to listen to anger without being defensive. When we are angry, I think God listens to us openly.

Third, ***prayer can be about expressing sorrow,*** about being repentant for how we have wronged others or maybe ourselves. When we ask God for forgiveness, it is usually after acknowledging to ourselves and to God that we have either behaved improperly or failed to behave in a way that God would like us to behave. Our prayer of confession every Sunday is an example of a group prayer to express sorrow, although this kind of prayer can also be done individually.

Fourth, ***prayer is about informing God.*** We can inform God of someone we know who needs God’s presence in her or his life. We can also inform God of the joys

we are experiencing or the concerns with which we may be struggling. I think a natural response to this view of prayer is confusion. If God is all-powerful, then God must know what we are thinking and feeling. If this is the case, we may ask ourselves, “Why do we bother to pray? And does God really need us to inform Him or Her of anything?” Well, I think the answer to this is that the practice of this kind of prayer, that of informing God, may be simply that: good practice! It is helpful for us to consider and reflect upon our joys and those things that trouble us. Also, God wants to be in relationship with us, and it is a relationship of reciprocity. Think of it this way: When Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, they hid from God. God called out to them, “Where are you?” Wouldn’t God certainly have known where they were hiding? But God is giving his people, including us, a chance to be in relationship with him. And this really is what all prayer is about – being in a close relationship with God. It’s kind of like asking a child a question to which you already know the answer. You are helping the child to learn by giving them the opportunity to work out the answer for themselves. This is what God is doing for us when we pray a prayer of information about ourselves.



The final kind of prayer I could identify is perhaps the prayer used most often. ***It is that of asking God for something.*** We do this every Sunday when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. We ask God to give us our daily bread, to forgive our trespasses, to lead us not into temptation, to deliver us from evil. Solomon prayed to God for wisdom. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was arrested that he might not have to be crucified, but he also prayed that God’s will would be done. Last week, while the youth and several adults were in Ocean City at The Rock United Methodist Youth Conference, we prayed for their safety as they traveled, and we prayed that the speakers and activities would bring them into a closer relationship with God. These are all reasonable things to pray for. Of course, I think there are some unreasonable things to pray for. Last week, during the Ravens game, I suspect there were many people praying in the final minutes of the game! I’m not sure God cares that much about football scores. So when we ask God for something, let us be mindful of what it is we’re asking for.

This asking God for something is important to consider. Pastor Steve Harper of the Northwest Texas Conference says that, for United Methodists, prayer is not about attainment. It’s not about getting something. Prayer, he says, is about the journey.

And this journey of prayer is our lifestyle. Prayer is how we enter into an intimate relationship with God. Prayer provides us focus. God expects great things from us – after all, we are God’s children! And Jesus himself that we would do even greater things than the things he had done. We cannot do God’s big plans for us without God’s power.

And this is the high definition of prayer. Prayer leads to God’s heart and to God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer is the key to the door that leads to God’s heart. Prayer is the key. Jesus Christ is the door. Behind that door is God’s heart and

God's desire for us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our journey is to forge that key. And since prayer is an ongoing conversation with God, that key is always being forged.

Magic? Mystery? Or Miracle? Our magic is that we continue to forge that key for the door of Jesus Christ.

Mystery? Prayer is a mystery because prayer is what leads us to the mystery of the Holy Trinity who is God. We cannot fully explain it, comprehend it, or control it; therefore, it is mysterious. And, it is about the movement of the Holy Trinity inward, upward, and outward as we are transformed into the likeness of the One with whom we are in conversation.

Miracle? Yes, prayer is that because through prayer, God has provided us a vehicle by which we can be in relationship with Jesus who, as today's Bible lesson says, is in the Father as the Father is in him. Jesus prayed that we might be unified and that we might be in Jesus as he is in the Father.

The high definition of prayer is that it can be movement toward God's heart, to a close love relationship with God.

I said I would provide you with some tips for prayer to help start you out on our 4-week study of prayer. Most of these ideas, I received from one of my professors from seminary, Laurence Stookey.

He says prayer has 5 parts.

First, address God. This could be simple as saying "God." But an adjective before we address God might be appropriate. Gracious God, Loving God, Mighty God, Wonderful God, Creator God – you get the idea.

Second, attribute something to God. Say who God is to you. Gracious God, who calls me forth to a new day. Mighty God, who created me in your image. Gracious God, who makes all things new... The second part of a basic prayer helps to center us as we reflect on who God is for us.

The third part is the meat of the prayer. It is the actual petition. The five purposes of prayer I talked about earlier. What are you thankful for? Or what are you angry about? What are you sorry for? What do you want God to know about you or someone you care about? Or what are you asking God for? Gracious God, who makes all things new, create in me a desire to know you better... Use action or vigorous verbs here: Create, increase, heal, forgive, grant, help, grow, provide, feed, encourage, inspire. These are just a few of the verbs we can use in the meat of our prayer to help us to consider the awesomeness of God!

After the petition, **say the purpose for the petition.** Gracious God, who makes all things new, create in me a desire to know you better so that I can share your love with all those I encounter this day. The “so that” and what comes after is the purpose.

Finally, the closing. This can be fairly simple. Pray in Jesus’ name. Gracious God, who makes all things new, create in us a desire to know you better so that we can share your love with all those we encounter this day. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Friends, how exciting it is that we have a God who wants to be in an intimate love relationship with us. Make some time each day to pray to God. Your prayers don’t have to be pretty or as structured as what I just outlined. But make some time to move into listening for God, to move to allow God to listen to you. Accept God’s invitation to enter into the wonderful mystery of relationship that is found through prayer! When we accept God’s invitation to be in an intimate love relationship with God, we may find that we become a prayer to the world!